[In the Hole]

Mari Tomasi Recorded in Writers' Section Files

DATE: AUG 5 1940

IN THE HOLE

Perez said, “Sometimes a friend asks, 'What're you doing now, Perez?' I hear myself say, 'I'm up on the Hill. In the Hole.' And the words surprise me as much they surprise the friend.”

Perez was a great strapping youth of about twenty-five. He passed his big hand over his hair in a boyish, helpless gesture. “If anyone told me five years ago that I'd be a quarryman today, I'd have told him he was crazy. It's the last thing I ever thought of doing.

“I've lived here all my life. My people are dead, all except a younger sister. My mother was Scotch. My father was Spanish, came over here from Spain. From Santander, that's where most of the Barre Spanish come from. And most of them are granite workers. But my father wasn't. He had a small meat shop. Raised his own cattle and did his own butchering. That way he made a bigger profit. It was a good business. My sister and I always had the best of everything. Then when I was a sophomore in High School my father died. He'd gone on a fishing trip with two friends of his. At the pond they separated. Well, when it came time to start for home again, my father was missing. They had to drag the pond with a net before they found his body.

“It was an awful shock to my mother. She died three months afterwards. My sister was too young to keep house so she went 2 to live with an aunt. I closed up the house and took a room with a family that lived nearby. My sister and I each received an equal share of my father's money. I had a guardian, but I managed to squander a lot of it, in spite of him.

I felt pretty big with all that money in the bank. In the winter I'd take in all the basketball games in Barre, Montpelier, Northfield and Burlington. I was going to dances then, too, and I couldn't seem to buy enough suits to satisfy me.

“After graduation I thought some of going to college. Of studying law. But the way I'd been going through my money there was just enough left for three years of school. And they'd have to be three careful years, too. I'd been living so well I couldn't see myself settling down to four or five years of studying and skimping. About this time a men's clothing store in town went out of business. A friend of mine who claimed he knew the business but had no capital talked me into buying the store and running it with him as partner. My aunt tried to talk me out of it, said I know nothing of that business, and that my partner and I were too young. But I wouldn't listen to her. It seemed a good thing to have a store full of men clothes. Well, I went ahead and bought the place. Invested almost every cent I owned.

“Two weeks went by and I felt confident enough of the business to visit my aunt and brag about all the customers we'd been having. I even laughed at her and kidded her for worrying so much about my investment.” Perez grinned. “I'm not joking when I say I was confident of that business. I thought it was a gold mine. I had a lot of friends. Especially the young crowd. I stocked the store with clothing they'd go for. And 3 they certainly went for it. I guess every young fellow in town blossomed out in a new suit or overcoat. Everything went fine for a month or two, then we had to stock up again. We sent bills to our customers, most of them had bought things on the cuff. We couldn't get much out of them. They were all young fellows like ourselves earning just a little, or not having any job at all. I realized then that if I wanted to re-stock I'd have to use the last of my own money. I didn't want to admit myself beaten, so I drew the money from the bank and put every cent of it in new stock.

“This time I wasn't eager to see a suit leave the store until it was paid for, or half paid for. I didn't have to worry much about that. Customers didn't come. The young fellows who still

owed us money were ashamed to trade with us for little things they could pay for—like ties, handkerchiefs, or socks. They'd bring their cash to some other clothing store."

Perez said, "Well, I had to go out of business within a year. Lost every cent I had. On top of that I had a wife to support. During those first few weeks when business looked rosy I decided I was making enough to get married. Our baby was born the week I lost the store. I didn't even have enough money to pay the hospital bill. I felt pretty cheap when my aunt went ahead and settled the bill. She didn't pull any of that I-told-you-so stuff. She didn't have to, she knew I was ashamed.

"We name the baby after my grandfather. I've never seen my father's folks. They're still alive, in Spain. My sister and I are the only grandchildren they have. They keep writing 4 and begging us to go over and see them. I don't read Spanish. I take them to my aunt, she translates them for us. At Christmas I get her to write a letter for me, then I copy it over. This last Christmas I sent them a picture of the boy. He's almost six now. They wrote back and said they'd made a will leaving half of their belongings to him.

"My aunt has never asked for the money she spent on my wife and boy. But I've managed to pay her back a little at a time. Two whole months after the baby was born I couldn't find any work. I was desperate and willing to take any kind of a job. An old friend of my father had a good job in one of the big quarries. I finally got work through him. I started off working on the grout piles. It was hard work and didn't pay much, but it meant a living. It was slow working up to a decent job. I'm a quarryman now. Can't say I like the work, I'm not satisfied, but at least it's hard, honest work, and I've learned to appreciate money. I've learned to live well on a little. Last week I bought half a pig. Paid only nine cents a pound. We froze the pork, and used the fresh meat every day. The ham and bacon we had smoked for four cents a pound. So the meat cost us thirteen cents a pound. Not bad, is it?

"In our quarry three-fourths of the workers are French. The rest are Italian, Spanish, Irish and Scotch. For some reason, the French are favored in our quarry. Maybe it's because

they were strike breakers back in '21, and breaking the strike meant a lot to the quarry owners.

“Work in the hole is about the same every day. You have to learn to stand sun, rain, snow or wind. If it's too bad we 5 don't work. But there's no staying abed for us. We have to report at eight, it's up to the boss to decide if the weather's too bad for work. I've seen it so foggy in that hole that I couldn't see the bottom. We put in 7 hours a day. If we work overtime, we're paid time and a half.

“At eight o'clock we climb down the hole. The longest ladders are made of logs, with two-by-fours for rungs. They're built to hold plenty or weight. First of all the boss chalks off the block' that's to be quarried. That's his job, along with seeing that everyone's supplied with work. No quarryman starts on a block until the boss has marked it off.

“Now the channel bar operators get busy, and drill holes on the chalk lines. The holes are 2 3/4 inches in diameter, and each one 3/4 of an inch apart. Quarrymen prepare the block for blasting by drilling extra holes with pneumatic jack hammers.

“A powder man does the blasting. If it's good stone we're quarrying, black powder is used. This has only a lifting effect. It pushes the stone six or eight inches from the bed. If we're blasting grout or waste granite, dynamite is used. This smashes and crumbles the stone. When the stone is ready for blasting a whistle is blown—two long whistles—to warn the workmen to stay clear.

“After a good block is blasted, the stone is cut into smaller blocks with plug drills. If the quarry has an order for blocks of a certain size the boss directs the yard men to cut them to this size. Otherwise they're cut to the most popular sizes.”

Perez continued, “Maybe you've noticed at the quarries that the stone lies in beds and has seams running through it. 6 If blocks are quarried near these seams, the size of them will depend on the way the seam runs—the seam is useless. The stone must be broken at the

seam. If a block measures 5 feet by 2 1/2 feet thick, it is called a sawblock. Sawblocks are carried up to the yard and piled there, on sale for whoever wants to buy them.

“To get the stone from the hole to the top, the blocks are first roped. Whoever does the roping signals to a man at the top of the quarry. The head derrickman. He relays the message or signal to the engine room, to the hoist engineer who operates the derrick. A whistle blows. The workmen get out of the way. No stone is carried over the workmens' heads. The derrick hoists the stone fast. A good sized block-say a 30 ton piece-is carried to the top in about four minutes. There used to be a time when a quarryman'd ride the block, but you don't see that now. It's against insurance company rules.

“Well, that's the usual way to get stone out. But almost every day we get stone that the derrick can't reach. The derrick reaches out into the hole only the length of the boom, so stone in awkward corners has to be handled by blounding, this puts the stone within reach of the derrick.

“ Bloundings are steel cables stretched across the hole. Over these is a saddle that rides back and forth within reach of the derrick and any part of the quarry wall. Double steel ropes equipped with hooks hang from these saddles. They pick up the blocks and carry them to the derrick; the derrick carries them to the top.

“We don't do much talking in the hole. You can't hear with 7 all those pneumatic tools working away at the some time. We talk by signals. For instance, if the boss wants me to help a channel bar operator, he points out the man and then taps one hand on the other—like this.” Perez tapped the fingers of one hand against the outstretched palm of the other.

“If I need a 1 1/2 inch ropes I pass my hand across my stomach.

“If I want a 1 1/4 inch rope, I pass my hand across my throat, like this.” Perez made a cutting motion at his throat.

Library of Congress

“If it's a 7/8 inch rope I want, I grab the thumb of one hand and wriggle the other four fingers.

“If I need a 1/2 inch chain, I make a slicing motion of my hands, like this - palms facing each other.

“We try to keep water out of the hole, but we never get the bed really dry. In our quarry an electric pump draws water out night and day. It pumps it up to a pond further up the Hill. It's a good quarry. We've had no fatal accident for three years. Of course, minor accidents happen. A crushed foot, or finger. Injuries to the eyes are fewer than ever. A law went into effect about a year ago ordering the wearing of thick goggles by workmen striking steal on stone, or stone on steel. It's hard to collect insurance on an eye injury if you haven't adhered to this law.

“In case of an accident, the accident rope is pulled. This rope is always in a handy position in the hole. It blows a whistle. A big metal grout box, used ordinarily to haul away waste granite, is lowered by the derrick. The injured man is put inside and carried to the top. To the office. A doctor is called immediately. While he is on his way, first aid in administered. 8 “Most accidents happen in the hole. The outside workers such as derrick men, engineers, machine shop employees, and riggers have few accidents. Riggers are the fellows who keep the hoists and derricks in ship-shape condition. They have to grease them every day.

“Each one of us has a certain type of work to do. We're kept busy all the time.”